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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000217

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/13/07
TAGS: PGOV PHUM BO
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS IMPRISONED OPPOSITION ACTIVIST

Classified By Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Ref: A. 05 Minsk 601
QB. 06 Minsk 731
QC. 05 Minsk 481

Summary

¶1. (C) On March 9, Ambassador met with Belarusian
political prisoner and Social Democratic party leader
Nikolay Statkevich at his place of internal exile. Though
isolated, Statkevich remains politically engaged and
offered Ambassador a sharp critique of de facto coalition
leader Aleksandr Milinkevich's and the coalition's efforts
to convene a democratic congress. Statkevich also
expressed his heartfelt gratitude to the United States for
its support for Aleksandr Kozulin and other Belarusian
political prisoners. He asked that we continue making such
visits with political prisoners. End summary.

From Baranovichi to Blon

¶2. (C) On March 9, Ambassador traveled to a correctional
dormitory near the village of Blon, an hour drive southeast
of Minsk, to meet with opposition Belarusian Social
Democratic Party "Narodnaya Gramada" (BSDP-NG) Chair and
presidential contender Nikolay Statkevich, whom authorities
had sentenced in 2005 to two years of internal exile, or
"khimya," for organizing pro-democracy demonstrations (ref
A). Meeting in his dimly lit, austere 6' x 10' room,
Statkevich related to Ambassador that his living conditions
and treatment by the security services had recently
improved, particularly since the authorities transferred
him from a similar khimya facility near Baranovichi,
southwest of Minsk, in September 2006. During the
conversation, Statkevich showed Ambassador across the hall
a similar room shared by four inmates in which he had been
quartered just before a recent visit by German Ambassador
Hecker.

Even in Exile, Statkevich Remains a Party Boss
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¶3. (C) Despite his relative isolation and long work hours
as a tractor mechanic at a nearby collective farm,
Statkevich told Ambassador that he stays politically
informed and engaged by subscribing to independent
Belarusian newspapers and through frequent visits by his
family, friends, and political colleagues. Statkevich even
showed Ambassador a Blackberry given to him by his brother,
a Ukrainian businessman, to issue press statements.
Moreover, the BSDP-NG party chief described how he and nine

other members of the European Party Coalition, which also
includes the opposition Belarusian Party of Freedom and
youth organization Malady Front, held regular meetings in
his cramped room to discuss issues facing Belarus' United
Democratic Forces (UDF) coalition.

Statkevich Disappointed with Opposition

¶4. (C) Noting that he had supported de facto coalition
leader Aleksandr Milinkevich's presidential campaign,
Statkevich expressed strong dissatisfaction with
Milinkevich's conduct since the March 2006 presidential
elections. He excoriated Milinkevich for failing to seize
upon the momentum generated by the post-election
demonstrations and for using the upcoming opposition
congress mainly as a venue for his own ambitions.
Moreover, Statkevich expressed doubts regarding the wisdom
of the UDF parties' efforts to convene an opposition
congress in the absence of a major election campaign.
However, he was equally critical of former opposition
presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin's party for
similar reasons.

Statkevich Ambivalent about Kozulin

¶5. (C) When Ambassador inquired whether he had been in
contact with Kozulin, Statkevich lamented that he had not
since Kozulin's imprisonment last year (ref B). Statkevich
seemed wistful and bitter as he recalled Kozulin's 2005
election as BSDP-NG Chair after the party had ousted
Statkevich from its chairmanship (ref C). [Note:
Authorities re-registered the BSDP-NG as the Belarusian
Social Democratic Party "Gramada" (BSDP) in June 2005. End

MINSK 00000217 002 OF 002

note.] Moreover, Statkevich sharply criticized Kozulin for
disparaging Milinkevich as a means to persuade the GOB to
register him as a 2006 presidential candidate.
Nevertheless, Statkevich called Kozulin a "strong and
courageous man" and praised the United States for raising
his plight at the UN Security Council in December 2006.

Gratitude and Recommendations for the United States
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¶6. (C) Statkevich characterized the United States as the
only major power with a truly principled human rights
position regarding Belarus and repeatedly thanked the USG
and the Embassy for its unwavering moral support for pro-
democracy activists and political prisoners. When
Ambassador asked what more the U.S. could do, Statkevich
offered two suggestions. First, Statkevich recommended
that the U.S. should continue its support for independent
media and, in particular, finance satellite television
broadcasts of news and political satire to attract a
broader Belarusian audience. Second, the Embassy should
continue visiting with other political prisoners. Pointing
to a wire running from his room into an adjacent room,
Statkevich told Ambassador the GOB was aware of her
presence and predicted that the regime would perceive such
visits as a powerful statement of support to prisoners of
conscience. [Note: We have repeatedly sought access to
political prisoners in jail, including Kozulin and
opposition youth leader Dmitriy Dashkevich, but the GOB has
either ignored or rejected our requests. End note.]

Comment

¶7. (C) Statkevich's criticism of Milinkevich and the
congress was neither surprising nor novel, given what we
have heard from other opposition leaders. Nevertheless,
Statkevich's story of personal and political perseverance
is inspiring. We will continue to seek access to other

Belarusian political prisoners.

Stewart